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Photo by: GREG FIGHT

Environmental specialist Jeff Sanchez, of the Hillsborough County Health Dept., surveys an area surrounding Coronet Industries to determine which homes lie within a one-quarter mile radius of the plant.

Testers To Tap Into Wells Around Coronet Industries

By DEBORAH ALBERTO dalberto@tampatrib.com

Published: Jul 31, 2003

PLANT CITY - Health officials will be knocking on doors in areas near Coronet Industries this week asking residents for permission to test their wells.

A survey of the area Wednesday revealed there are between 75 and 90 private wells within a quarter-mile radius of the phosphate processing plant, which has a long history of environmental problems.

About 30 to 45 wells will be sampled initially as officials embark upon a yearlong public health assessment of the area. Well samples will be tested for metals, fluoride and other contaminants, said Randy Merchant, a state health department spokesman. Later in the week, officials will return to collect samples for radiological analysis.

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"Those parameters are subject to change, depending on what we find," Merchant said. If the tests show a reason for concern, officials likely will extend sampling to include wells within a half-mile radius of the plant, which is just south of the city.

If gross alpha tests come back positive, health officials will test for radium and uranium, county health officials said. When phosphate is mined, naturally occurring materials containing low levels of radiation also are dug up, according to the Florida Institute of Phosphate Research.

It could be about six weeks before the official results are in, but if contamination is found in a private well, those residents will be notified immediately, said Shaun Crawford, an environmental scientist with the state health department.

Crawford is part of a six-member team stationed at the state health department but funded by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, an arm of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and he works solely on public health assessments by the federal health agency.

Residents of a neighborhood northwest of Coronet and a community east of the plant sought help from the federal government in researching what they say is a high rate of cancer and other illnesses, which some people say might be associated with pollutants from the plant or old landfills in the area.

The federal toxic substances agency is investigating whether contaminants found on Coronet's property are seeping into private wells.

A recent statistical analysis by the state health department showed rates of cancer in ZIP codes for those two neighborhoods are slightly below the state average. But health officials will take a closer look, Merchant said.

Residents of the community northwest of the plant get their water from the city, which health officials don't believe is contaminated.

But airborne pollutants are a potential source, and the county's Environmental Protection Commission stands ready to assist should there be a need, said the agency's air director, Jerry Campbell. The plant discharges tons of emissions into the air each year, officials say.

Health officials said the first priority is testing wells, but soil and air tests are considerations.

The state Department of Environmental Protection tested 14 wells for contamination about a year ago and found a slightly elevated level of arsenic in one. The department provided the residents a water filtration system, but DEP officials contend the arsenic wasn't at a level that would pose a threat. The health department considers arsenic to be excessive at levels exceeding 10 parts per billion, but Florida uses a 50 parts per billion standard, DEP spokesman Mike Zavosky said.

Reporter Deborah Alberto can be reached at (813) 754-3765.

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